

# 31

## MEDIA, MOVEMENT(S) AND PUBLIC IMAGE(S): COUNTERSPINNING IN SCOTLAND

**CounterSpin Collective<sup>1</sup>**

One of the key achievements of the last ten years has been the establishment and development of our<sup>2</sup> own forms of media. The global Indymedia network, *SchNEWS*, wiki-based websites,<sup>3</sup> independent films and local papers are all examples of attempts to create multiple spaces for debate, and for sharing information about our activities and politics with each other and with the wider world. More than mere sources of 'news', these media have provided vital inspiration, helping to build a real sense of solidarity amongst our many diverse (and diversely located) struggles.

The notion that we can directly speak, write and create, without having to struggle to have our voices heard and our stories told undistorted within the mainstream media, has been central to this development, as have issues of access to information. Seeking to directly challenge the idea that we should have to appeal to higher authorities for acceptance, legitimacy or mediation, this enormously important movement to reclaim forms of media (and create new ones) continues, offering a growing radical alternative to corporate news sources.

However, we need to look critically at how the vast majority of the population in the UK and beyond rely on the mainstream/corporate media for information about current affairs. This is not something we can simply wish away: it is something we need to confront. For these purposes, we should understand

mainstream media itself as a site of struggle where we must challenge the kinds of political practices, policies and processes we are critical of. Moreover, we should question the content and form of 'news' production itself and the opinion-shaping that goes with it, at the sites where this actually takes place, and not just reflect on it within our own spaces.<sup>4</sup>

The CounterSpin Collective (CSC) emerged from within the Dissent! network as part of a collective attempt to work through this problem with particular reference to the G8 summit protest in 2005. The idea was to try and struggle for a space for 'our' critiques within the mainstream media, whilst also counteracting the polemical, at times hysterical, ways many of us are often portrayed in the mainstream media when we organise direct actions, especially at international summits like the G8.

It's not surprising that some activists oppose all dealings with the mainstream media. Whether this refusal is founded on having been personally misrepresented by journalists in the past, or on the fact that media coverage can and has been used against activists in courts and by the police; or whether it stems from a sense of futility in engaging with The Media<sup>5</sup> at all, because of the way that news in general is so distorted – these experiences have made us tread with caution. Having said that, all too often our debates about The Media become polarised,<sup>6</sup> as if there were fixed ideological positions of either rejecting any engagement with the mainstream media, because of its role as part of the establishment and the system of global capitalism, therefore structurally unable to further any critique of the system it is a product of, or of naïvely befriending anyone with a notepad, camera or microphone and hoping for the best.

The situation is more complex than this. Of course, no one involved with the CSC harboured any illusions about the structural role of The Media within global capitalism. We all understood that it doesn't exist as a 'neutral'/objective news service, always to critically hold politicians and other 'leaders' to account. Furthermore, we were well aware of some of the political and ideological barriers we would face in our attempts to engage with this media, and that the outcomes of our efforts would necessarily be a compromise. At the same time, many of us felt that it was a mistake to reject the possibility of strategically using mainstream media outlets to promote our ideas and tackle head on the discourses of politicians, corporations and political commentators we disagree with in ways that were also accessible to the public. And in doing this, we felt it would also challenge consumers/recipients of such media coverage to think differently outside of their own comfort zones. Many of us saw self-imposed isolation as a luxury that we collectively could not afford. How can we fight for a better world if we don't share our ideas and activities with those around us who live outside of our activist circles? What chance do we have if the vast majority of the 'general public' either don't hear about our activities at all, or only from perspectives other than our own?

## BIRTH OF A NOTION

In February 2005, the semblance of a media response group emerged and began to look at ways of engaging with the mainstream media. Activists who had organised around the European Union summit in Dublin on May Day 2004 offered support and advice, giving our fledgling group much-needed confidence. Their workshops helped enormously in building the practical knowledge of people intending to facilitate mainstream media engagement. We set up an email list where refreshingly reflective discussions took place, as we tried to look at concerns regarding representation: what or who any notion of 'we' might constitute and what kinds of messages, if any, 'we' wanted to get across. This actually triggered much needed self-reflection, which went beyond discussions around mainstream media engagement. For example, what were we actually trying to achieve in organising actions against a summit like the G8? And how did this relate to questions of mediation and representation within a movement that holds dear its political diversity and its critiques of leadership and representation?

At a Dissent! gathering in Leeds in March 2005, some participants proposed that a media response group be set up for the Festival of Dissent!, taking place the following month. There had already been a flurry of journalists contacting the various email addresses listed on the Dissent! website, with sensationalist stories appearing in the tabloids about 'anarchist training camps' and the like. Moreover, the Glasgow Reshape! group had specifically requested help responding to interview requests. A press release was issued, and after much debate, a number of stringent rules for dealing with the press were agreed upon. These related in particular to the degree of access that journalists would be granted to the Festival site and the nature of acceptable filming and photography.

The Festival of Dissent! attracted significant mainstream media coverage. There were a few irritating 'exposés' in the *Daily Record* and *The Times* about our inability to put up marquees, and two individuals were inaccurately named as 'ringleaders'. However, we did meet a few journalists face-to-face and felt that we had enough control over the interviews we gave, experiences which set a constructive precedent for the next few months. A number of journalists consistently reported in what we thought was a fair way – at least always giving us the option of commenting. For a first foray into mainstream media engagement, it had been a decidedly positive experience.

After the Festival of Dissent!, The Media<sup>7</sup> continued to call looking for interviews and responses to police statements, or to find out about the myriad groups (such as the Clown Army, the People's Golfing Association and so on) who were planning actions as part of the summit protests, as well as plans for how activists were intending to travel up to Scotland. Discussions during the Festival of Dissent! helped form a vague plan for further media work which solidified during the following months. At the end of the Festival, a number of people from local, working and action groups gave us their names and contact details. If and when

journalists approached us, we would put them in touch with these people. At the expense of having no coverage at all, we operated on the basis that if no one came forward from the various autonomous groups, then there would be no response – although some groups did ask for our direct assistance in communicating with journalists.

Things gained a little more structure at the Dissent! gathering in Nottingham in May 2005, where the media group took on the name ‘Counter-Spin Collective’. Our main efforts here and throughout the subsequent mobilisation were always to *facilitate* media relations for all those groups within the Dissent! network who wanted our help, like a sort of ‘dating service’ for journalists and activists (to schmooze with each other, one may quip!). A comprehensive list of global press contacts was built up, and we put together a network of translators, so that press releases could be distributed in multiple languages beyond the UK, often within as little as 24 hours. For a number of working and action groups this method proved effective. Individuals also wrote letters and personal responses to mainstream media, contradicting the positions articulated by police spokespeople and government officials. In two cases that we considered slanderous/libellous, formal written complaints were made to the newspaper concerned as well as to the Press Complaints Commission. In another case, a journalist was specifically challenged about unfair coverage of certain activists. The resulting conversation might have been the motivation for their second article the following week, this time about police violence against activists (or it may just have been that the latter made the better story the following week).

### **ON-SITE AND OFF-SITE**

As the summit approached, the fact that 5,000 protesters were going to be camping in Stirling meant that it became a hub of mainstream media activity. A few days before the Hori-Zone (the eco-village in Stirling) officially opened, consensus was reached at an evening convergence meeting to allow accompanied journalists on site for a period of one hour. This limited period was agreed out of respect for those who did not want to be subjected to any coverage, and in order to control mainstream media access to the site on our own terms. This way, such media coverage could be better contained in an environment where there were such differing opinions on the matter.

We produced a press release announcing the ‘open hour’, and collated a press pack containing past press releases from Convergence 2005 (the working group responsible for the Hori-Zone), along with press releases from action or local groups. At 11am the next day, the corporate media arrived at the gates. Journalists were taken in groups of four and five onto the site for a tour and to meet people for interviews. An hour later they were escorted out again. Another benefit of channelling the media engagement through a facilitation group was that people with interview experience were able to share the skills they had acquired with other



new interviewees. Consequently, people were not thrown by ambiguous questions as much as they might have been, and were able to stick to a few key points about why they had come to Scotland. The event ran smoothly, increasing confidence within the CSC.

While tabloid coverage ranged from rants about blood-sucking anarchists to happy hippies intent on saving the world, some papers (such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*) along with the Scottish TV channels produced acceptable reports, where comments made by activists were not grossly distorted, and where there seemed to be hints of critical reflection offered in the coverage. This was definitely better than much of what had gone before and many stories carried the idea that Hori-Zone was aiming to be a model of a different type of social organisation: inspiring, ecologically sound and organised non-hierarchically in an inclusive way. Again, this experience reinforced our belief that our ideas could be spread via the mass media in a more positive way on specific organised occasions.

Soon after the Hori-Zone opened, the media response group erected a 'media gazebo' outside the site perimeter, near the entrance. It was set up off-site and clearly marked so that it was an obvious point of first contact for journalists and photographers. Here we explained to Media visitors that no journalists or photographers were allowed onto the site. Some journalists were upset by this and would argue one of two positions. They would either demand their right of access to a public space, or they would try and cajole us by asking us how they could

provide fair coverage under such restrictions. In such cases, we would reiterate the consensus of the Dissent! network on the matter and proceed to brief them on further particulars, most importantly that they should not refer to any interviewees as spokespeople for Dissent! or photograph anyone without their consent. People from the CSC would then offer to find interviewees for them, which most journalists were actually pleasantly surprised about, as they saw this as us doing their legwork for them! Interviewees were usually selected at random (asking passers-by inside Hori-Zone whether they were up for giving an interview), or were arranged to suit the language requirements of the media outlet in question, or based on prior consent by willing individuals, who we would call on the phone.

Having followed most of the press coverage about Dissent! in the lead-up to the summit, we were able to build up a list of journalists that we regarded as 'supportive' or 'unsupportive', with degrees of cooperation offered accordingly. Consequently, journalists who had a good record of reporting favourably were granted interview opportunities, while others were asked to leave or were directly confronted about the nature of their journalism. This was a deliberate attempt to go beyond any false dichotomies in which all mainstream journalists are seen as necessarily having politically 'bad' intentions, or for that matter, all indy journalists as necessarily above criticism.

By July 5, the media reception tent was full and the phones constantly ringing. In this hectic environment, it dawned on us that we had not yet thought concretely enough about a media response plan for the following day of action. Out of this worry, an *ad hoc*, two-fold 'strategy' emerged: on the one hand, we would try and facilitate dialogue between activists and journalists during the day of action and gave the CSC mobile number to both parties; on the other, we counted on the presence of mainstream media being useful as a defence tactic in the event of the eco-village site being surrounded or raided by the police. When the police did eventually surround the camp at 2am on Thursday morning, and fear was spreading as to the possibilities of a full-scale raid, the CSC contacted some trusted journalists,<sup>8</sup> an action which had been agreed on at a site-wide meeting that afternoon – only to find that the police press office had already alerted all of the main media outlets to their plans.

During that night, the limitations of the CSC became apparent once again. As TV crews gathered behind the police line, the idea emerged of giving some sort of statement to the press. This statement would put into context our political motivations for protesting against the summit and relate it to the nature of the repression we were currently facing from the police. Whilst some set to the task of putting a short text together, others felt uneasy about it, fearing hostile criticism from within the Dissent! network for being seen to be acting as spokespeople without consulting others inside the eco-village at the time, i.e. the community of people affected by the situation at hand. The action was abandoned in the end because we could not agree, but the uneasy question has to be asked: was this a



lost political opportunity for engaging with the public through The Media,<sup>9</sup> to get our point across at a time when they were most interested in us? If it was, how could this moment have been used more effectively?

At 8am on Thursday morning, two activists were allowed through the police lines to speak to the 20 or so journalists camped on the roundabout, at the request of those who had spent most of the night out there negotiating with the police. At around 10.30am the news spread through the eco-village that bombs had exploded in London and an eerie silence descended upon the Hori-Zone: from this point onwards, the mainstream media interest in us dropped dramatically and the police line drew a little thinner before being disbanded later that day (although not until a full-scale forensic sweep of the eco-village was agreed to).

But our moment in the spotlight wasn't quite over. As the summit drew to a close, a couple of people gave an interview to Radio 5. They explained that the G8 summit had been successfully disrupted, and why this had been a necessary thing to do; they illustrated how civil disobedience was a legitimate form of protest and argued that the issues of climate change and poverty could never be solved by institutions such as the G8, whose very existence is tied up with the kinds of exploitation of people and of the environment which exacerbate poverty and ecological destruction. This was an articulate and timely interview that, juxtaposed with the G8's weak communiqué officially released around the same time, served to highlight the shortcomings and failures of global capitalism and its institutions.

Another political moment that was perhaps lost, not by the CSC *per se*, but by our movement(s) more generally, was in relation to the July 7 London bombings. Despite the fact that a paralysis of shock and worry swept the Hori-Zone at the news, we could have thought about how to publicly (and again through The Media as one channel) articulate our concerns and our politics at this time.

## **SOME LESSONS LEARNT**

The pro-active media stance taken by those working within the CSC meant that journalists had a point of contact with people from within the Dissent! network. Even if not all media coverage of the protests was as we might have wanted it,<sup>10</sup> what we were able to do was actively push for space within the mainstream media spheres for our politics to be made visible, as well as respond, albeit not always completely successfully, to where de-politicisation, de-legitimisation and criminalisation of our actions occurred in the public domain. It was alleged, for example, that weapons were being found on people leaving the convergence centre site – camping knives and tent poles hardly constitute weapons – but the police were determined to place the camp in the worst light possible. When we challenged this, the BBC and ITN both changed their online reports to include unedited comments by activists explaining the ridiculous police accusations.<sup>11</sup>

Working within the CSC, we were constantly aware of the problems with the nature of our work, but we were still disheartened at the level of hostility we faced from within the Dissent! network, where the people who were in support of our work seemed to be either in a minority, or were maybe just less vocal. We experienced repeated hostility and encountered inaccurate gossip about what we were doing. In one instance at the Hori-Zone, activists speaking to journalists were screamed at and threatened with physical violence and then had bottles thrown at them from inside the site. This hostility was cumulatively very demoralising and some were concerned that they would face the sort of political crucifixion experienced by those who had engaged with The Media during previous mobilisations of this sort.

A number of questions arise here. When our aim is to avoid recreating the kinds of oppressive power structures we are critical of within our own networks, is it simply a matter of trusting that those who want to engage with the corporate media will do so in good faith with regard to their fellow activists? Is this good faith any different to that which we show individuals who choose to be street medics, legal observers, police negotiators, cooks or compost toilet-builders? Obviously, engaging with the mainstream media involves engaging with an entity that is 'external' to our movement(s), and is bound up with all the issues to do with the politics of representation in a way that being a cook, street medic or legal observer<sup>12</sup> might not be. But at the same time, how can we learn to trust each other and share our skills with others? How can we find comfortable degrees of specialisation within our movement(s), enabling people to take on specific tasks



and be held accountable for them? How do we resolve the kinds of conflicts we have around such issues before, during and after mobilisations? Can we go beyond agreeing to disagree?

Further to these arising questions, there were our own shortcomings as the CSC. We were inevitably limited by time, energy and resources, and too often we were forced to fire-fight issues as they arose. Once the Hori-Zone was open, we lacked a coordinated link with its decision-making processes. We could have been more effective if we had been able to attend logistics, barrio, and site meetings much more frequently than we managed to do, or if barrios had sent representatives to the twice daily CSC meetings.

Moreover, the CSC could have been more pro-active, as opposed to reactive. We could, for example, have attended police press conferences to counteract misinformation on the spot; we could have visited and/or come up with some sort of creative direct action at the G8 summit's own press centre; we could have facilitated much more provocative press releases to highlight political issues, been more available for interviews, engaged more with local media, especially local radio, and written even more articles for the mainstream papers. Additionally, we could have released a Dissent! press release/communiqué on July 6, explaining why so many people felt so passionately about shutting down the G8. Whether (and then, how) to do these sorts of things collectively remains an issue for us all and we need to reclaim the space (from ourselves!) to talk politics within our movement(s). Unfortunately, it often seems like we get too het up with the practicalities of organising, thus forgetting the wider politics at stake, or we end up making politics and practicalities synonymous, whereby the way we organise practically becomes the be all and end all of our politics.

But, when we're out on the streets, or in the Scottish hills, what is it that we're actually trying to do? Are we trying to get a message across? Are we trying to galvanise support for our politics and/or 'convince' people beyond our own activist circles? Do we need to worry about things like 'public image'? Is a summit protest a spectacle? If so, who explains or represents that spectacle to the world, and should it need 'explaining' or 'representing'? Is protest something that is limited to a person's experience of it, those energising 'moments of excess', of putting oneself, in all sort of ways, on the line for what one believes in? And perhaps more provocatively: to what extent can a disdain for the mainstream media be another way of remaining firmly locked in the inside-outside dichotomy of counter-culture/sub-culture versus the mainstream, not wanting to engage with anything that's considered 'mainstream' because of being beholden to an existence as 'anti', as 'indy', as 'alternative', as 'pure', thereby reproducing precisely the kinds of static identity positions which capitalism thrives on as it continuously commodifies identities?<sup>13</sup>

These and other related questions have been asked by many others many times before. Nevertheless, these are questions that are still bubbling away under



the surface of our actions, and will need to be addressed continuously as our contexts and compositions change. But maybe this is why we should shift from struggling with the question of *whether* to engage with The Media, to the question of *how*. In this spirit, this piece is a reflective contribution to that proposed shift as much as it is an account of ‘CounterSpinning’ in Scotland.

- 1 This text has not been collectively written or endorsed by the CounterSpin Collective, but is an attempt by some of the individuals who were involved with this collective to reflect upon key events and arising questions.
- 2 Throughout this text, notions of ‘we’ have been used in a three-fold way. First, we refer to ‘us’ to talk about the people involved with the CounterSpin Collective. Second, we have used a notion of ‘we’ to refer to the groups, networks and individuals who came together around the G8 summit protest in 2005, the Dissent! network and the eco-village ‘Hori-Zone’ in Stirling. Finally when we ask some broader reflective, political questions, the ‘we’ includes those people who were not necessarily at the summit protests but who consider themselves to be part of or sympathetic to the politics of these networks and/or spaces. We have chosen the first person plural because we want these reflections on media work to be read as coming from within this movement.
- 3 ‘Wiki’ is a piece of server software that ‘allows users to freely create and edit web page content using any web browser’, see <http://wiki.org/> for more info.
- 4 Which are also, of course, never ‘neutral’ spaces devoid of normative assumptions or power relations.

- 5 This term is capitalised in this text to refer to 'mainstream' or 'corporate' media.
- 6 Although it seemed too often like the situation was not so much polarised, as one in which a few individuals or one or two collectives within the network, who felt very strongly that we should under no circumstances engage with the media, would block any collective media work, thereby creating a deadlock around the issue of media engagement, which raises the issue of how we work through conflict, rather than remain paralysed by stalemate when we use certain kinds of consensus-decision-making methods in our networks.
- 7 Before and during the mobilisation, we had contact with UK-based and some foreign press across the globe. The organisations that maintained the most frequent dialogue with us were The Guardian, The Independent, The Scotsman, BBC, Channel 4 and the Associated Press.
- 8 We also communicated with Indymedia activists who were not at the eco-village.
- 9 As one particular site of struggle.
- 10 Whatever that may mean!
- 11 It is perhaps also relevant here to mention that Stirling Council remained publicly supportive of the eco-village throughout the protests.
- 12 We might point out that legal work involves an implicit recognition of the state's juridical system and that, at one time, legal volunteers were subjected to opprobrium from certain sections within social movements.
- 13 For interesting arguments on this notion, see Nato Thompson, *The Flipside to Commodification of Revolution: A Critique of the Activist Scene*, archived at <http://www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org/4/issue4.php?page=nato>.